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BOARD OF
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SPECIAL MEMORANDUM

The September Presidential Election in South Vietnam

Secret

8 August 1967
No 7-67

C E N T R A L I N T E L L I G E N C E A G E N C Y

OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

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SPECIAL MEMORANDUM NO. 7-67

SUBJECT: The September Presidential Election in South Vietnam

1. The merger of the rival presidential candidacies of the two principal military leaders, Chief of State Thieu and Premier Ky, into a single slate headed by Thieu has caused significant changes in the atmosphere of South Vietnamese politics. The combined military slate itself is likely to end military factionalism, at least until after the election. Moreover, the withdrawal of Premier Ky's candidacy for the top post has lessened the prospects that north-south regional rivalries will affect the coming campaign. At the same time, however, the joint slate portends a sharpened military-civilian clash during the election period, and raises some questions about effective cooperation between the two groups in the future.

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Military Unity

2. The formation of the joint ticket, which was announced in late June, resulted from the efforts of the four military corps commanders and the joint general staff chief. They insisted that the Thieu-Ky rivalry, which was generating increasing bitterness between the two men and between their supporters, had to be resolved in favor of military unity. The Thieu-Ky merger underscores the influence of the corps commanders and a few other senior officers. The actions of these men represent an effort to ensure their collective voice in any future military government, and somewhat reflect their belief that General Thieu, who has tended to act as a first among equals, will be responsive.

3. The merger has obviously had important implications for Thieu and Ky personally. Before, General Thieu was generally given little chance of winning the election; with the military establishment officially united behind him, he is now the odds-on favorite. Ky has of course lost none of his current governmental authority, but is quite concerned about his status should the Thieu-Ky slate be elected. According to

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the constitution, the vice president is almost entirely dependent upon the president for any authority. There is apparently broad agreement among the leading generals that Ky will have a "strong voice" in the cabinet of the future government, but the details probably will be spelled out only in actual practice. Should the Thieu-Ky ticket be elected, it seems likely that rivalry between the two could again become a source of serious trouble.

4. Ky is already facing the problem of preserving his political influence among civilian groups. His previous success in building such political assets probably depended to a large extent upon expectations that he would become president. Ky in effect must now approach these groups anew and ask their support for a Thieu-Ky ticket. Although Ky is obliged to campaign for the military ticket, he has not yet fully committed himself in this direction. Ky's campaign organization, however, is a valuable asset to the military slate, and by using it to help ensure a military victory at the polls, Ky can probably enhance his ability to bargain for influence in the future government. Despite his concern about his future status and his suspicions of Thieu, Ky probably feels he has little choice but to work for the election of the military slate.

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5. The possibility remains that a residue of the friction between Thieu and Ky supporters during the past several months will impede the smooth functioning of the military's campaign organization. Nevertheless, a breakdown in military unity between now and the election seems unlikely.

The Civilian Contenders

6. In addition to the military slate, there are ten civilian tickets officially entered in the presidential race. Some of the lesser known candidates may withdraw before the election. In any case, there are only three civilians whose candidacies are significant. Tran Van Huong, a southerner and a former premier, is widely regarded as the strongest of the three. Phan Khac Suu, another southerner and chairman of the provisional national assembly, is also respected, but he will be competing for the same southern votes as Huong. The third notable civilian candidate is the Dai Viet party leader from central Vietnam, Ha Thuc Ky. He is not seriously regarded as a potential winner, but he does control a fairly solid bloc of votes which he could probably swing to another candidate if he desired.

7. In view of the military's recent move towards unity, the leading civilian contenders may be influenced to work towards corresponding civilian unity. Although it is now too late to make changes in the actual composition of slates, candidates can still disavow their candidacies and pledge their support to someone else. Representatives of the leading civilian contenders reacted to the joint military slate by agreeing not to criticize each other's candidacies, but reportedly went no further in terms of mutual cooperation. However, should they arrive at the joint conclusion that they stand no chance of winning as individual candidates and that a future military government offers them little, if any voice, they might opt for some kind of coalition among themselves. For example, if either Phan Khac Suu and Ha Thuc Ky withdrew their candidacies in favor of former premier Tran Van Huong, he would pose a serious challenge to the military ticket. If both withdrew in favor of Huong, the election would then become a virtual two-man contest, and it would be even more sharply defined as a clash between civilians and the military.

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The Pre-Election Period

8. What course the civilians do follow depends to a great extent on the climate of their relations with the military during the next month. Over the past year, military-civilian frictions have not prevented the formulation of a constitution or agreement on electoral laws. However, mutual suspicions caused several near crises during the process. In addition, there is a considerable difference between agreeing on ground rules and actually selecting a president.

9. Political excitement is bound to rise in any event, since a large segment of the Vietnamese elite will be deeply immersed in politics until the election. For example, there are nearly 500 candidates for the 60-man senate, which will be elected concurrently with the president. Included in this total are many high ranking civil servants, over 50 military officers, and a majority of the current provisional assembly. Ordinary, day-to-day issues which arise in such a highly charged political atmosphere are bound to be magnified and distorted, and some will certainly tax the political talents and wisdom of the government during the campaign period.

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10. The actual campaigns of the various civilian presidential candidates will most likely be based on general opposition to the continuation of the military government, and will probably devote little attention to other competing civilians. The military will be attacked for existing problems, such as corruption and inflation. The military will of course try to discourage votes for civilian candidates by stressing the fact that the armed forces must play a leading role in present day Vietnam.

11. The question of which candidate is likeliest to bring about a satisfactory end to the war, however, could emerge as the central underlying theme of the campaign. Tran Van Huong in particular is likely to hammer at the point that only a broadly based civilian government can win the peace, implying that a vote for the military is a vote for more war. Huong will probably not offer any radical or unique peace formula, but by championing the cause of peace and putting the military on the defensive, he could score some sizable gains among the voters.

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12. The election could also be influenced by the Viet Cong and by the militant Buddhists of central Vietnam. Last year, Viet Cong propaganda and threats had little effect on the Constituent Assembly elections. It is not yet clear whether they will employ the same tactics -- which would probably be no more successful than last year -- or try a new approach this time, possibly including the use of such clandestine assets as they may have within the non-Communist framework. Tri Quang's Buddhists have remained relatively inactive since last year's "struggle" movement, but they remain a formidable force in Central Vietnam. If Quang does take an active role, however, he will undoubtedly oppose the military ticket.

Outlook

13. As things now stand, the military slate has to be the favorite in the coming election because of its large and relatively united organization, the finances available to it, and its control of the government. However, it is not unbeatable, and the civilian candidates will in any event play a key role in the election process. Even if the civilians do not unite, there is just enough uncertainty about the

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strength of military unity and enough uncommitted groups of voters to make for some fluidity.

14. The chances that the election will be held on schedule appear fairly good. The generals would probably consider postponing the election only if they felt their chances at the polls were so poor that even extralegal pressures would not tip the voting in their favor. It is conceivable that such a situation might develop, but not likely.

15. We can be less confident about the chances for fair elections. If the leading civilians continue to pursue their individual candidacies and no crisis develops, the military slate should be able to win honestly. However, an attempt by the civilian candidates to unite would probably cause the military to react by exerting questionable pressures. If unfair tactics by the military began to affect campaigning seriously, the civilian contenders might withdraw in protest, thus rendering the election largely meaningless. If illegal tactics were employed on election day or immediately prior to it, the civilians could refuse to acknowledge the results, and instead charge fraud. Even if the civilians do not unite, the generals may tend to underestimate their own prospects

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and thus feel compelled to exert unnecessary pressures. Additionally, some province chiefs and other local government officials may independently become overzealous and ultimately do more damage than good. Further complicating the general issue is the possibility that the elections may be widely regarded as having been unfair even though the military leaders make no deliberate efforts in this direction.

16. Whether or not it were well-founded, a general belief that the elections were rigged would thwart the major purpose of constitutional development--- that of establishing a legitimate mandate for the government which in turn would improve its prospects for rallying popular participation and support. To dispell such suspicions, the civilian contenders at a minimum would have to acknowledge tacitly that the elections were fair, and the constituent assembly -- now acting as a provisional legislature -- would have to ratify the election results without reflecting much doubt. Even more effective would be the appointment of the candidate who runs second as prime minister since it would considerably strengthen the government's claim to legitimacy. There

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are, however, many problems -- including the question of military rivalries after the election -- which are standing in the way of such a development, and it constitutes little more than a possibility at this point.

FOR THE BOARD OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES:



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Acting Chairman

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